



The Palm Springs Community Church was damaged in a fire in September. Gary Johns of the Palm Springs Historic Preservation Foundation photographs what is left of the inside of the church. OMAR ORNELAS/THE DESERT SUN

Protecting the city's heritage

Palm Springs mulls law, security updates after blaze guts historic church

By Xochitl Peña
The Desert Sun

PALM SPRINGS — Piles of scorched wooden beams, charred metal chandeliers and clay roof tiles lie in tangled bundles where parishioners of the historic Palm Springs Community Church once gathered for worship.

Through what once was a roof, you can see the church's steeple and the San Jacinto Mountains.

"It's breaking my heart. It's a major loss to the city, no doubt," said Gary Johns during a recent tour, his tennis shoes leaving impressions on the ash-filled floor.

The Sept. 18 early morning fire that damaged a significant portion of the church serves as a reminder for Johns, a member of the city's Historic Site Preservation Board, of how vulnerable the building was despite its Gothic exterior.

The official cause of the church fire and a blaze at the historically significant Carnell building in July 2012 have yet to be determined, fire officials say. But a popular theory is they were caused by the homeless.

"We have a lot of our buildings that are inhabited by various people who are indigent or people who are drug users," Councilwoman Ginny Foat said.

Please see **BUILDINGS, A2**

Buildings

Continued from A1

during a City Council meeting the night of the church fire.

Since then, the city has been working to beef up security and its laws to protect what are considered the six most endangered historic buildings remaining: the Town & Country Center, the Racquet Club, Oasis Hotel Tower, Orchid Tree Inn, La Plaza and a building at 760 N. Palm Canyon that sits within the Las Palmas Historic District.

The city has temporarily hired private security to drive by and walk around the buildings, providing "extra eyes and ears," City Manager David Ready said. Talk about changing the city's laws could happen in January.

For a resort city that depends on tourists and celebrates historical buildings that attract tens of thousands of people for Modernism Week and other events, city leaders and preservationists say it's important to protect treasured buildings.

One potential change would be to have vacant property owners pay an annual fee to fund the buildings' security.

"One thing we know we want to achieve is ... more of a partnership with the owners of downtown vacant buildings," Ready said.

The city reviewed FEMA guidelines on how to secure vacant buildings, such as better ways to board them up, and could incorporate more stringent conditions into its ordinance, he said.

The community development staff also is creating a database on all the vacant buildings and lots in the city. It would provide real-time information about ordinance en-



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forcement if there are citations issued or any other problems.

The Palm Springs Community Church, built in 1935, is owned by Richard Weintraub, a Malibu developer who used to own the Indio Fiesta Mall and has restored a number of historical buildings throughout Southern California. He did not return a phone call for this story.

Ready said he expects Weintraub to submit plans for a project on that property soon.

In an interview following the blaze, Weintraub said he "spent a small fortune keeping the property boarded up" and "having somebody there on a regular basis." He said he didn't know what else he could have done.

Sitting on a bench outside the Town & Country Center, Michael McWhirter echoed concerns about vacant buildings. As a semi-retired architect, the preservation of buildings is close to his heart. He hates to hear of fires.

"It's a problem that needs to be addressed," he said.

THE ENDANGERED LIST

The Historic Preservation Foundation created this list of historic buildings that need protection:

» The Town and Country Center, 174 N. Palm Canyon Drive, owned by the Wessman Development Co. Designed by A. Quincy Jones and Paul R. Williams.

» The Racquet Club, 2743 N. Indian Canyon Drive. "This complex of Hollywood lore has sat derelict. Structures threatened due to vacancy include the Bamboo Room, one of Charlie Farrell's homes and the Shiff House." Judy Dlugacz, owner of Olivia Communities, a company that organizes lesbian cruises and travel, owns the complex. In September, Dlugacz said she was looking for an investment partner to help her turn the area into an "LGBT and friends" housing project.

» Orchid Tree Inn: 261 S. Belardo Road. Owned by Malibu developer Richard Weintraub and adjacent to the Palm Springs Community Church, which he also owns.

» Oasis Hotel Tower: 121 S. Palm Canyon Drive. Designed by Lloyd Wright, son of Frank Lloyd Wright.

» La Plaza: 115 S. Indian Canyon Drive. "There are several vacant storefronts that pose threats."

» 760 N. Palm Canyon Drive: This building is not considered historic, but it's within the Las Palmas Historic District, which includes the Kocher-Samson and Casa Palmaras structures, which are considered Class 1 Historic buildings. "A fire to one potentially affects them all."

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DAVID READY

Palm Springs city manager